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Not Good Enough

Special Report on Government Services for Children and Youth

1999 Annual Report

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A Word from the Advocate

This year, as I complete almost five years as the Child, Youth and Family Advocate, it is appropriate that I report to the Legislature on the 11,755 children and youth we have heard from and about and how their needs have been met during that time. I have included a special report called *Not Good Enough* in my 1999 Annual Report as a review and assessment of programs and resources provided by the provincial government for children and youth and their families in British Columbia.

Since 1995, services to children and youth have been the subject of considerable discussion, debate and change. Five years later I am disturbed by the lack of progress toward, indeed the erosion of comprehensive and integrated services for children, youth and their families. It is not good enough, not for children and youth and not for our society. We know that as a society we will pay a price in the future for not providing essential services in a timely manner.

Not Good Enough calls for a halt to the erosion of services to children, youth and their families and a renewed effort to provide:

- early development services for all children
- early intervention services so that difficulties can be dealt with in a timely way
- comprehensive services for families when their children need help at the onset of problems
- adequate services for children and youth who have government as their parent—services we would all be proud of
- comprehensive services for children and youth with special needs, and assistance to keep families together.

Not Good Enough examines in detail the services provided by the Ministry for Children and Families with a specific focus on activities of 1999. The information in this report has been drawn from many sources including information provided to us by individuals, Ministry reports, responses from the Minister in the legislature, and discussions with Ministry staff and community organizations.

My analysis raises five key concerns:

1. The Ministry for Children and Families is focused on reducing costs and this results in a reduction in services for children, youth and their families, leaving many people desperate and in crisis.

2. There has been a significant reduction in the availability of programs for those who voluntarily request services and are not in an extreme crisis situation which would require a child to be removed from the family home.

3. Local offices and their staff have not been given adequate support to develop comprehensive services. Good legislation, policy and standards exist but many of these have not been implemented.

4. There is a staffing crisis in the Ministry for Children and Families due to problems in the recruitment of new social workers and the retention of present staff. This has not allowed for the development of a stable and mature work force.

5. Early development services have not been expanded despite compelling research and early intervention services have been reduced due to Ministry pressure to reduce costs.

It is time to act on behalf of our children and youth. They are our future and yet we are not providing them with the resources they need to grow and develop.

British Columbians need to know that essential services to children, youth and families are not being given sufficient priority. We must continue to advocate tirelessly on their behalf. I ask you to join me in reversing the disturbing trends I describe in *Not Good Enough* and in working to provide all children and youth with the services they need to grow.

Joyce Preston
Child, Youth and Family Advocate

Early Development and Intervention

Overview

1999 has not been a year of progress in securing comprehensive early development and intervention services. Early intervention services are designed to address the needs of children and youth as soon as a problem is identified, before they are in crisis. Early development services are designed to go a step further and invest resources during the first five years of a child's life to promote healthy growth and development. Research has shown definitively that early development and intervention services are cost effective. When children and youth are provided with the services they need early in their development, they are far more likely to reach their full potential as adults. The Ministry for Children and Families continues to review programs and develop frameworks related to early development and intervention but has yet to put these plans into effect. In fact, existing services such as supportive services, special needs and voluntary care agreements have been significantly reduced.

If it makes good social, moral and economic sense to provide early development and intervention services to all children, youth and families in need in British Columbia, why has progress to date been random and insufficient?

The Ministry for Children and Families remains focused on providing reactive services, services geared to those who are in crisis. In our experience these are often the same individuals and families who did not receive early development services and did not receive appropriate treatment services when problems first arose.

We know that the costs of early development and intervention services are considerable, and we also know that the full benefits of these services may take a generation to materialize. We must plan for the future, it makes good sense. Currently, government designates its resources to trying to fix the problem after the fact. The cost of these reactive services is rapidly growing beyond our ability to provide them. It is essential that we reverse this trend. If we don't invest in our children and youth now, we will surely pay more in the future.

What Happened in 1999?

The Ministry for Children and Families listed Promotion, Prevention and Early Support as one of its 15 Priorities for Action.[1]

Regional early intervention plans created in 1997 and 1998 did not materialize as actual services in 1999 due to changes in regional boundaries and a lack of dedicated funding to support and expand these programs. For example, programs to prevent fetal alcohol syndrome were part of several regional plans. Programs that were already operating struggled to keep their funding support. New fetal alcohol syndrome prevention programs were not implemented in any region in 1999.

The Ministry for Children and Families prepared an evaluation of the Building Blocks Program[2] and this report is to be released early in 2000.

The Ministry for Children and Families announced a review of early intervention programs and services. The review intends to address the gaps and overlaps in existing programs, and develop a policy framework for the delivery of all prevention, promotion and early support services.

Childcare services—a cornerstone of early development strategies—moved from the Ministry for Children and Families to the newly created Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security. *Building a Better Future for British Columbia's Kids* is a recently released discussion paper about childcare services. The paper outlines options to enhance current childcare services but does not propose a program that would create comprehensive, affordable, accessible childcare services. This step requires commitment from the provincial government. The Quebec childcare model is a good example. British Columbia—like Quebec—must commit to providing childcare. Childcare is much more than a labour force strategy, and it is central to early development services.

Early intervention services from the Ministry, that provide support and treatment to children, youth and families that request it were reduced. This affected many families whose children have behaviour problems and those older youth who could not live at home. Equally, children who have special needs faced barriers to services such as a lack of home support and voluntary care services.

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[1] The 15 Priorities for Action are the Ministry's priorities for service and policy development. They are available on the Ministry's website at <www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/programs/priorities.html>.

[2] Building Blocks is the Ministry for Children and Families' long-term promotion, prevention and early support strategy.

Advocate's Recommendations and Assessment

The Advocate has recommended:
That an early intervention fund be created as a public/private partnership and be separate from the budgets to provide current services to children and youth.
(1998 Annual Report)

That government create a separate dedicated early intervention fund for the children of tomorrow. (1997 Annual Report)

These recommendations have not been implemented.

Early intervention services have not been expanded and in fact have been cut back. The Ministry for Children and Families has taken the position that services will only be provided if the child or youth is in need of protection as defined under Section 13 of the *Child, Family and Community Services Act*.[3]

The Ministry for Children and Families' retreat into an "emergency only" position has left most early development and intervention services to the beleaguered community sector. Many community agencies report that they are being expected to direct already scarce resources to services for crisis situations leaving them less able to provide early development and intervention services to families that are trying desperately to stay together.

The current delivery of mental health services provides a good example of this shift. Mental health social workers report that they no longer have time to work with schools to promote good mental health and early detection of mental health problems in young people. They are required to focus on severe crisis situations and are concerned that the number of children and youth in crisis will grow without early detection, intervention and treatment.

This realignment and redefinition of the Ministry's mandate is rationalized as providing more effective case planning for individual children and youth. Certainly, individual case planning for children and youth desperately requires attention, but this change to a reactive policy and the resulting cutbacks in service indicates a lack of vision in government planning.

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[3] *The Child, Family and Community Services Act* deals with the protection of children and youth who are neglected or abused or living without proper supervision. It also designates the rights of children and youth under care, oversees the delivery of services to people with special needs, and offers support services to families in need.

For example, a component of the early intervention strategy used by the Ministry for Children and Families has been voluntary care agreements and special needs agreements. These have allowed for joint planning between families and Ministry social workers to deal with problems early and in a less disruptive way than having children or youth removed from their homes. Both agreements allow children and youth to enter care for a specific time period to receive necessary services with the family maintaining guardianship[4] and involvement in the life of their child.

Both of these programs were restricted in 1999. The written policy and practice standards offer these options yet the directions given to line staff is that they are only to be used in exceptional and extreme circumstances and not as a preventative tool.

Here are some examples of the effects this has had on the lives of children and youth.

> A mother called us desperate to find services for her thirteen-year-old son. He was exhibiting serious behaviour problems, at times was aggressive and the whole family was on the verge of coming apart. She knew of other families who had been able to place their children temporarily into government care so the child or youth could receive treatment and the family could regain some equilibrium. Those arrangements had been made by using a special needs agreement.[5] This option is now only available to children with mental handicaps. This thirteen-year-old had to be in need of protection (from his parents) in order to enter government care and receive treatment. It could not be done on a voluntary basis. The family was devastated by the choices they faced. As the family problems intensified the thirteen-year-old was eventually removed from the family home by the Ministry. His relationship with his family is permanently affected.

Statistics provided by the Ministry for Children and Families show that the number of special needs agreements dropped by 15 per cent between September 1998 and September 1999—a reduction of 137 agreements. The number of children and families requiring these services remained the same. Social workers tell families that the only way they can provide services is to remove the child from his or her family and put the child into government care.

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[4] A guardian has the ongoing legal responsibility for the care of a young person, including responsibility for major decisions such as schooling and health care.

[5] Special needs agreements may be made with a parent to meet the day-to-day needs of their child when he/she has significant impairment requiring specialized care and support outside of the home.

> A fifteen-year-old girl was in care with a voluntary care agreement[6] and also on probation. Due to her age (she was about to turn sixteen) the Ministry for Children and Families would not renew her agreement for foster care which put her in breach of her probation order that required her to be in a home and keep to a ten p.m. curfew. Her many appeals to the Ministry and to the Children's Commission resulted in her being allowed to stay in a youth corrections facility for 60 days. She was told, however, that she could not stay longer in voluntarily care. Today, she has no family to go to, is terrified and sees few options but the street.

This is not an isolated case. Ministry statistics show that between September 1998 and September 1999, the number of voluntary care agreements dropped a dramatic 41.4 per cent—from 1,486 agreements to 870 agreements. While the Ministry for Children and Families states that essential protective services remain available for youth sixteen and older, calls to the Advocate's Office indicate otherwise. Unfortunately, as it stands, most children and youth must be under age sixteen, and they and their families must be in crisis to gain access to services. This almost sixteen-year-old young girl was judged to be too old for voluntary care and not to have reached a sufficient level of crisis.

During the June 1999 Budget Estimate Debates, the Minister for Children and Families, when asked about the development of an early development and intervention fund said,

> "I mentioned earlier that we do have a broad array of early interventions and we've seen some of those results... the reduction of SIDS deaths is 44 per cent; low birth rate, 8 per cent; infant mortality rate, 30 per cent; teenage mother rate, 23.9 per cent; mortality rate for four to fourteen year olds, 14.3 per cent. So we do have a number of prevention programs, public health programs, childcare programs, general family support programs, family support programs for children with special needs, Healthy Kids (the school meal program) — there are a number of different programs that do early intervention. As to whether or not we would support a special fund, I'd have to look at that. Special funds are the jurisdiction of the Minister of Finance and those would be things that would have to be discussed very carefully with her. We are always grateful for extra dollars that we can get to put into prevention and early intervention, but as I said, those are issues that would be beyond this ministry's ability to make a decision on."

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[6] Voluntary care agreements may be made with a parent to meet the day to day needs of a child when the child is placed in care of government or when the parent is temporarily unable to look after the child at home.

The combined effects of no growth in essential early development and intervention services and cutbacks to early, voluntary supportive services is very serious. Child protection services are essential. Children have a right to be safe. Early development and intervention services are equally essential to prevent abuse and neglect in the long term. We cannot afford a shortsighted approach that will be costly in the future.

Government as Parent

Overview

Many children and youth that have government as their parent had a difficult, anxious time in 1999. They faced many uncertainties. Would suitable foster homes be found and funded? Would these young people be able to remain in foster homes that were working for them? Would they remain in the care of government? Would these children and youth be able to maintain steady relationships with qualified, supportive social workers?

The Ministry for Children and Families' role as the guardian for over 16,000 children and youth in 1999 was dictated by fiscal concerns. Those seeking assistance from the Advocate's Office, many of them young people themselves, reported that when dealing with the Ministry, good planning and practice appeared to be secondary to concerns about costs.

There are cost pressures on all government services, and the Ministry for Children and Families is no exception. However, the drive to contain and reduce costs must be secondary to providing essential services. All decisions must be based on what is best for children and youth, and the Ministry must respect the importance of strong and lasting relationships in children's lives.

Young people who depend on government need advocates, especially as changes which affect them are introduced. The stated fiscal goal of reducing costs for young people in care by $20 million (part of a total plan for cost reductions totalling $72.9 million) has led to decisions that are not always based on the child's best interest. Children and youth are often voiceless, and thus vulnerable to budget-driven agendas. It is up to all of us to ensure that their best interest remains central to all services offered.

What Happened in 1999?

Standards, Policies and Procedures

While the Ministry for Children and Families continued to develop good standards, policies and procedures, these standards were not consistently implemented across the province.

Some standards, policies and procedures introduced in 1999 were:

- Practice Standards for Guardianship[2] set policies to guide the work of guardianship social workers. These standards will be the foundation for future reviews of social work practice.
- Looking After Children[3] program was introduced in September 1999 for the children who are living in the care of government on a continuous basis.
- In-service Foster Parent Training Program was developed in conjunction with the BC Federation of Foster Parent Associations and provincial colleges.

The standards developed by the Ministry for Children and Families continue to demonstrate a high level of expectation for social work practice. Yet there is a wide gap between written standards and how they are implemented. This gap reflects the insufficient attention paid to social workers and supervisors in local offices who deal directly with children and youth and their families. The lack of stable staffing and consistent, ongoing training for supervisors and social workers remains a significant concern and I discuss this in more detail in "Adequacy of Resources" (page 31).

Effects of Cost Reduction

In 1999, the stated goal of the Ministry for Children and Families was to reduce the number of children and youth in care and to reduce the associated costs by $20 million—a reduction of approximately 10 per cent from the previous fiscal year. While the budget was reduced, the number of children and youth in care has remained the same. This indicates that services, but not the number of children, and youth that need them, have been correspondingly reduced.

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[2] Practice Standards for Guardianship encompasses all the rights, duties and responsibilities of a guardian in providing for the physical, emotional and developmental needs of a child.

[3] Looking After Children is a program designed to help social workers assess children's progress, monitor the quality of care they are receiving and make plans for improvement in key developmental areas.

To reduce costs the Ministry introduced the Child in Care Utilization Management Strategy[4].

The stated program goals were:

- To improve placement for children in care by assuring the right alternative for the right child at the right time.

- To successfully demonstrate the Ministry's capacity to reduce costs and growth in costs through effective case management and alternative resource utilization strategy.

These two separate and often conflicting goals—to improve practice and to reduce costs—lead to different interpretations, directions and implementation province-wide.

Calls to the Advocate's Office in 1999 indicated that the Ministry for Children and Families' focus on cost reduction had a negative impact on the essential services that children and youth received. Many of the calls for assistance related to the review of placements by regional Placement Review Committees[5].

Placement Review Committees were given final say in all decisions concerning where children and youth in care would live—decisions that previously rested with the local office. The concerns expressed to the Advocate by children and youth in care focused mainly on anxieties about being moved to new homes without any apparent planning that included the child, youth or significant people in their lives. The children, youth and families that called told us that they saw the Ministry's priority as reducing costs rather than assisting children. The goal, from the point of view of those calling, was to save money. Ironically, despite these cost-reducing efforts, the average cost per child in care per month increased by 3.6 percent in 1999.

Additionally, Placement Review Committees did not appear to encourage learning or provide supportive environments for local staff whose decisions were being reviewed.

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[4] The core features of the Child in Care Utilization Management Strategy include regional plans to review placement of children in care and special projects such as foster parent recruitment.

[5] Placement Review Committees are a component of the Child in Care Utilization Management Strategy and review all foster care placements.

Foster Homes

The Ministry for Children and Families spent considerable resources on recruiting foster homes. While the number recruited is not clear, there has been an increase in homes that provide specialized care for children and youth.

Support for foster parents increased with the formation of the Federation of Aboriginal Foster Parents, the establishment of a provincial after-hours support program for foster parents, and the development, with the BC Federation of Foster Parent Associations, of comprehensive foster parent training.

Advocate's Recommendations and Assessment

Annual Funding

The Advocate has recommended:
That the Ministry for Children and Families automatically receive annual funding based on the number of children in government care. Further, I recommend that government amend the Child, Family and Community Services Act to include this principle.
(1997 Annual Report)

This recommendation has not been implemented.

The focus in 1999 has been to reduce child-in-care costs by introducing the Utilization Management Strategy. This is an inappropriate goal. Children and youth need a guardian that meets their needs as any good parent would.

Therefore, I repeat my call for guaranteed funding for services to children in care, funding which is founded in legislation and unaffected by budget restraint activities of government.

Foster Homes

The Advocate has recommended:

That the supply of foster homes and staffed residential facilities be increased in order to adequately meet the placement needs of children and youth who are currently in care and to meet the projected future demand for placement. (1998 Annual Report)

This recommendation has been partially implemented.

This recommendation, originally made by the *Task Force on Safeguards for Children and Youth in Foster or Group Home Care*[6], received much attention in 1999. With additional staff assigned to each region, foster home recruitment was pursued on a dedicated and full-time basis. Further, a review of satellite homes and specialized residential care was undertaken but as yet has not been submitted.

There is a lack of clarity about the number and type of residential resources that are required. The development of an inventory of resources is essential to the creation of a needs-based budget, projected over the next five to ten years.

Post Majority Services

The Advocate has recommended:

I recommend that the Child, Family and Community Services Act be amended to guarantee these services (post majority services) to young adults who have been in care. Saskatchewan's child protection legislation can serve as a model. It states that these services shall be provided, not that they may be provided. (1997 Annual Report)

This recommendation has not been implemented.

Children and youth living in government care must leave care when they turn nineteen, regardless of their personal situation. They cannot stay in foster homes and continue to receive services. As we all know, not everyone is ready to leave home at nineteen. As good parents we continue to support our children for the rest of our lives. Children and youth under government care do not have this opportunity.

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[6] *Task Force on Safeguards for Children and Youth in Foster or Group Home Care*, in 1997, reviewed ministry legislation, regulations, and policy; examined actual practice as experienced by children and youth in care, foster parents, group home staff, families, ministry social workers, aboriginal and multi-cultural communities and other stakeholders.

While the Ministry for Children and Families has expressed its commitment to provide services to youth after they reach the age of 19 through the program Services to Former Permanent Youth-in-Care (SPY)[7], there have been no consistent program criteria developed or funding guarantees put in place.

Over the past five years there has been much review and discussion. The first review of this program, conducted in May 1995, was never finalized or released due to organizational changes in the Ministry.

There was a follow-up to this review in December 1997 that was released along with the Ministry's comments in November 1998. A Policy Review Committee was established in December 1998. Further follow-up reports were published in August and November of 1999.

Therefore, over a five-year period there has been little actual progress despite the clear recommendations that:

- Provincial criteria for Services to Former Permanent Youth-in-Care be developed to provide consistent services in all regions.

- Each region assess its program needs, leading to the development of an appropriate, separate needs-based budget.

It is imperative that the Services to Former Permanent Youth-in-Care program is adequately funded, founded on consistent procedures and policies, and is available province-wide.

Therefore, I repeat my call for the creation of an adequately funded, consistently applied program of services for former youth in care based on these recommendations.

[7] Services to Former Permanent Youth-in-Care, formerly Post-Majority Services, provides support and maintenance to enable an individual to continue or resume education or training to promote self-sufficiency.

Services to Older Youth

Overview

With respect to youth services, my focus over the past three years has been on older youth who cannot live at home and are not in government care. Many of these youth lack education and life skills, and are dealing with substance abuse or mental health problems. It is essential that we help these young people address their needs.

At the end of 1999, services specifically designed for older youth (between the ages of 16 and 18 years) were introduced by the Ministry for Children and Families. However the eligibility criteria for these new youth services limit access and no new resources have been provided for this new program.

What Happened in 1999?

In December 1999, new legislation was proclaimed creating Youth and Transitional Support Services and Agreements as a section of the *Child, Family and Community Services Act*. It provides the framework for services to support and assist youth in the transition from childhood to independence. It also allows the Ministry for Children and Families to provide services to youth by agreement. This new legislation fulfills the functions that I, and other advocates, have been calling for over the past three years.

The criteria developed for the program however, is very limiting and will continue to exclude many youth who are in need. In order to access the new Youth and Transitional Support Services program a youth must meet all the criteria listed below:

- The youth must be between sixteen and nineteen years old, or under sixteen and married, a parent or expectant parent.
- The youth has no parent or other person willing or able to assist them.
- There must be at least two identifiable high-risk behaviours present. The youth must be dealing with addiction, exhibiting significant behavioural or mental disorder, working in the sex trade or homeless and absent from school, work or therapy.
- The youth has agreed to a Plan for Independence[1] and has the ability to accomplish the plan.
- The agreement is in the best interest of the youth.

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[1] A Plan for Independence is a Ministry for Children and Families document that details the needs, goals and service plan for the young person.

Services to older youth who do not meet the above criteria will remain with the Ministry of Economic Security and Social Development under their program to provide income support to youth under the age of nineteen years.

Advocate's Recommendations and Assessment

Section 9

The Advocate has recommended:

That Section 9 of the Child, Family and Community Services Act be proclaimed and a program called Services for Older Youth be established. (1998 Annual Report)

This recommendation has been implemented.

This new service is a welcome addition and can provide services specifically designed for older youth.

There are three concerns arising from the manner in which the program and related policy criteria have been developed.

1. The eligibility criteria limit those older youth who can access these services. The criteria overlook those that do not or cannot live at home and who are not yet involved in more than one of the high-risk activities listed above. Here are the stories of two young people affected by these limitations:

    > Tom, a sixteen year old, was attending school in Grade 11, and in 1998 left government care to try and work things out with his father. Things didn't work out. His father kicked him out and Tom wanted to return to government care. He was refused government care and told to find someone else to live with. He managed to receive income assistance (BC Benefits) after quitting school. He has started using hard drugs, which means he may now qualify for services under a Youth Agreement. Tom needed these services *before* he turned to the street and drugs.

Sally is also sixteen years old. She was referred to a safe house by a school counsellor. She was dealing with conflict and abuse at home and had attempted suicide more than once. She was refused government care. Sally was also told to find someone to live with. She discharged herself from the safe house and fled to Toronto. Since then, she has been hospitalized three times for suicide attempts.

These young people will not qualify for services under the current eligibility criteria.

The Ministry for Children and Families must look at the needs of youth like Tom and Sally and expand the eligibility criteria so they can obtain essential services.

2. Youth who do not meet the eligibility criteria can apply for services from the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security. This Ministry may or may not provide income support to youth under age nineteen. They also lack staff who are specifically trained to make youth assessments. Further, the assignment of delivery of services to older youth to two different ministries creates confusion for those trying to access services. If clear lines of ministry responsibility are not established young people will fall between the cracks in the bureaucracy.

   In the past, too many have been lost in the shuffle and have ended up without money for food or a safe place to stay.

3. My final concern is that the Ministry for Children and Families has not been provided with additional resources for Youth and Transitional Support Services and Agreements. These services are an added responsibility for social work staff and draw on existing budgets. Current workloads are already excessive and this added responsibility is left to compete with other essential service demands.

Therefore I recommend:
That the eligibility criteria for Youth and Transitional Support Services be changed by removing the requirement for involvement in at least two high-risk behaviours in order to qualify.

That additional resources be provided to the Ministry for Children and Families to allow the full development and delivery of Youth and Transitional Support Services in all areas of the province.

Eligibility Assessment Tool

The Advocate has recommended:

That an assessment tool be developed to guide decision-making regarding the eligibility of older youth. Like the child protection risk assessment tool[2], this would lead to more consistent decisions being made about the provision of services. (1998 Annual Report)

This recommendation has been implemented.

The assessment tool covers the following areas: intake and safety assessment, youth assessment, and family assessment. It will assist in the development of consistent practices throughout the province. Community-based workers, as well as Ministry youth workers will require training in the use of this assessment tool.

As the Ministry for Social Development and Economic Security will continue to serve young people who do not currently qualify for Youth and Transitional Support Services, its staff will also require training in assessing the needs of young people who apply for assistance.

Youth Benefits

The Advocate has recommended:

That older youth, once qualified for financial support, receive benefits which are predetermined and outlined in regulations, regardless of which ministry administers the program. (1998 Annual Report)

This recommendation has not been implemented.

In response to this recommendation, the Ministry for Children and Families stated: "Care has been taken to harmonize benefit rates, wherever possible, with the existing rates paid to youth-in-care in the Independent Living Program, and to youths served through the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security in the Income Assistance for Minors program."

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[2] The risk assessment tool is a standardized process for investigating child abuse (i.e. past abuse, parental character, and the condition of the home environment). This process allows social workers to assess the risk of future harm from abuse or neglect, and direct interventions, service plans, and resources accordingly.

My recommendation asks government to guarantee that qualifying youth receive benefits as an **entitlement** (similar to adults who qualify for BC Benefits) regardless of budget considerations. This is **not** how the new Youth and Transitional Support Services program has been set up. Services are available only as long as the Ministry for Children and Families has sufficient financial resources.

Service Delivery System

Overview

The overall structure of the Ministry serving children and youth and their families makes a difference. It is essential that the Ministry for Children and Families: put its guiding principles and values into action, not only in policy statements, but in the every day practice of its social workers; evaluate its programs and implement the subsequent recommendations; and support the daily work of social workers in their local offices. The Ministry for Children and Families has made insufficient progress in these areas.

What Happened in 1999?

In February 1999 the Ministry implemented its most recent administrative re-organization creating 11 new regions to replace the original 20 regions created in 1996. The central management structure was also changed creating five Assistant Deputy Minister positions reporting to the Deputy Minister.

The Ministry for Children and Families published *Measuring Our Success — A Framework for Evaluating Population Outcomes* which outlines factors that assess the health and well-being of children and their families. For example, because healthy birth weight for infants is an important indicator of positive early development, birth weight is monitored throughout the province. The current report reflects the total population in British Columbia and provides an overall sense of how our children and youth are doing.

The Ministry for Children and Families evaluated their complaint process and provided copies of this evaluation to the Advocate, the Children's Commission and the Ombudsman. The evaluation concluded that the complaint process failed to respond in a timely manner, lacked a child-centred approach and was not inclusive of those affected by the process. The Ministry committed to review and revise the complaints process policy, to develop new communications materials to better inform Ministry clients and to develop competency based training for staff.

Advocate's Recommendations and Assessment

Principles of Good Service

The Advocate has recommended:

That the Ministry for Children and Families provide direct services that are accessible, responsive and timely, inclusive, child-centred, comprehensive and accountable. (1998 Annual Report)

This recommendation has not been implemented.

These principles describe the values that must underscore all service delivery for child and youth programs. The single, focused goal of the Ministry for Children and Families should be to implement them at a local service level.

In my 1998 Annual Report I outlined barriers to service, based on our Principles of Good Service[1], as identified by individuals who call the Advocate's office requesting help. A lack of accessibility, responsiveness and inclusion were identified as the top three barriers.

The Principles of Good Service have been incorporated into the standards and policies created by the Ministry for Children and Families. They must now be implemented in each local office, and must become part of the practice of social workers. Resources must be provided to allow this to happen.

Children and youth and their families assess the quality of the service from the Ministry by how they are treated. They want services to be prompt and respectful; they want to be provided with accurate, complete information; and they want to be included in decision-making.

During the June 1999 Budget Estimate Debates, the Minister for Children and Families said:

> "In terms of barriers, yes, there are some barriers. Many of those are directly to do with costs. I know that the Advocate would like to see us have a blank cheque for the Ministry. Hey, I'd like that too."

[1] Principles of Good Service are: accessibility, responsiveness, timeliness, inclusive practice, child-centred planning, accountability and comprehensive programs and services.

Access to Information and Services

The Advocate has recommended:

That the Ministry for Children and Families provide the Child, Youth and Family Advocate with its plan to address the issue of access to information and/or services by children, youth and families; and to introduce and implement standards for staff response-times to requests for assistance. (1998 Annual Report)

This recommendation has not been implemented.

Access to information and services in a timely manner remains a problem. Typically, people who contact the Advocate's Office say about the Ministry for Children and Families, "they take forever to respond," and, "I never heard back from them."

The Ministry for Children and Families is complex, as are the services provided. Their staff must commit to proactive ways of providing individuals with the information they need. This requires staff time as well as written materials.

The Ministry has stated:

> "Staff response-times to requests for service are determined according to: the urgency of the need of the child, youth or family requesting service; the availability of specialized staff to provide the assessment for eligibility; and travel time including seasonal barriers to assess the need for service in more remote regions."

Standards for response-time already exist in child protection practice. The risk assessment tool provides time frames based on the safety and well-being of the child or youth. Individuals who are not at a recognized crisis level remain uncertain about when, or if, they will receive service.

Public Report on Quality Assurance Program

The Advocate has recommended:

That the Ministry for Children and Families, in 1999, provide a public report on the findings and outcomes of its Quality Assurance Program. (1998 Annual Report)

This recommendation has not been implemented.

The purpose of a quality assurance program is to ensure that the service provided is effective and of the highest quality. Programs and services need to be evaluated and appropriate changes introduced. Additionally, complaint processes must be widely accessible, comprehensive, and integrated. The findings must be shared with staff in a constructive, learning environment.

I requested that the Ministry for Children and Families provide me with all reports providing assessment and evaluation for the years 1996 to 1999. To date, I have received 32 reports. While these reports demonstrate the breadth of review and evaluation work undertaken by the Ministry for Children and Families, there is no evidence the information gathered is reviewed in a comprehensive way to identify common trends and concerns. Such an overview would help the Ministry set the appropriate focus for staff and program development.

For example, in reviewing six major program evaluation reports and seven individual office audit reports it was clear that they contained congruent and significant findings. All reports stated that there was insufficient assessment and planning for children in care, a lack of sufficient documentation of the work undertaken and inadequate levels of training and support (initial and ongoing) for social workers and supervisors. Ninety per cent of these reports spoke to the lack of adequate resources to provide essential services, the lack of inclusion of children, youth, families and service providers in planning and the lack of monitoring of plans made to determine progress. Seventy-five per cent of the reports raised concerns about social work staffing levels, the gap between policy development and policy implementation and the apparent lack of a child-centred approach.

These findings would lead one to conclude that the focus of all efforts must be on the direct practice of social workers and supervisors at the local level. This would include appropriate training and support and sufficient resources to ensure that assessment and planning work is done in a comprehensive manner and that work done is documented.

The Ministry for Children and Families has a complex and protracted process for receiving and reviewing evaluative reports. When submitted, the reports are reviewed by the Ministry's senior staff for accuracy and compliance. Staff then prepare a response to each recommendation. This often delays the release of important reports for months or years and this compromises their usefulness.

The Ministry stated that it reports its performance to the Minister, the public, the persons served, the service providers and the Legislature through a variety of means. I do not believe that the method of reporting provides the public and key stakeholders with comprehensive and timely information.

Therefore, I repeat my call for a single public report on the findings and outcomes of all the quality assurance activities.

A Final Word About Stability in Administrative Structures

In my 1998 Annual Report, I stated that "the Ministry for Children and Families remains distracted by administrative re-organizations."

No administrative structure is perfect. Minor changes or adjustments to the Ministry's structure are appropriate, but major restructuring is not. It only creates chaos and distraction and delays getting on with the primary job of ensuring quality services.

The Ministry must stop restructuring and develop effective services in local offices around the province—a theme repeated in all of my annual reports. It must pay more attention to recruitment and retention, help staff to implement the good policies and procedures that have been developed, and ensure that supervisors' primary responsibility is the monitoring and mentoring of staff. Finally, the Ministry must provide sufficient resources based on the needs of children and youth.

Adequacy of Resources

Overview

In 1999, insufficient resources were provided by the government to meet the needs of children and families. Services that are essential include child protection, services for children and youth in government care, mental health programs, family and individual counselling, alcohol and drug services, support for special needs children and their families, and programs for youth.

The key factors that lead to this lack of sufficient resources were:

- The Ministry for Children and Families was required to reduce their budget by $72.9 million despite no decrease in the demand for its services.
- A social worker staffing crisis due to high staff turnover levels and difficulties in recruiting new social workers.
- Insufficient training for team supervisors and supervisor workloads which did not allow them to provide effective supervision, direction and support.

What Happened in 1999?

Based on the 1999/2000 Budget requirement to save $72.9 million, the Ministry for Children and Families developed a cost-reduction strategy[1] that affected all areas of service delivery.

Funding to most large community agencies was cut by 1.5 percent to contribute $12.6 million savings towards the cost-reduction strategy. Many community agencies reported that these cuts affected essential services and increased waiting lists.

Drug and alcohol rehabilitation services were expanded in June 1999 with the announcement of an additional $9.25 million for new programs. Sixteen communities received additional funding to develop day-treatment programs, purchase detox[2] and treatment beds, and increase the number of counsellors.

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[1] The Ministry's cost-reduction strategy is described in more detail on the Ministry's web site at <www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/pubs/1999_2000_Budget.html>.

[2] Detox facilities provide a safe, supportive residential environment where people can go for detoxification, which involves managing the effects of withdrawal.

Social work staff increased by approximately 250 positions. This staffing increase however was offset by a crisis in the recruitment and retention of social workers. Social workers reported that their workloads did not allow them sufficient time to carry out full risk assessments, prepare comprehensive plans of care[3] for children and youth in care, and complete necessary documentation of their work.

Training for new child protection social workers was moved to post-secondary institutions and became a pre-condition for employment.

The Ministry for Children and Families developed training in clinical supervision (overseeing case work) and one hundred team supervisors were trained. Three hundred team supervisors require this training.

Integrated case management training was developed and introduced in November 1999. An orientation was held for 40 Ministry staff and 13 community representatives.

Despite a growing need, services for children and youth with special needs and their families were not expanded. The Ministry for Children and Families announced its intention to create a Special Needs Policy Framework to address the issues of eligibility criteria and gaps in service.

Advocate's Recommendations and Assessment

Implementation of the Workload Review Project

The Advocate has recommended:

That the Ministry for Children and Families fully implement the results of the Workload Review Project[4] over the next three years, providing adequate staff to fulfill its mandate. (1998 Annual Report).

Insufficient information to assess implementation of this recommendation.

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[3] A plan of care establishes an overall goal for a young person in government care. The plan is based on the young person's needs and includes: services that will be provided to meet those needs while in care; the views of the young person, parents, and community regarding the plan; and a schedule for reviewing the plan to ensure the young person's needs are being met.

[4] Workload Review Project assessed the workloads of child protection social workers, the amount of time required to complete each task, and projected changes in the volume of work over the coming year.

The Ministry for Children and Families secured 250 additional staff positions as a result of the Workload Review Project report. This significant staffing increase was eroded by a crisis in staff recruitment and retention. Turnover level among social workers was very high and recruitment of new social workers was more competitive as other provinces and the United States vied for the same candidates. Children and youth need long-term, stable relationships with their social workers to thrive in government care. The constant introduction of new (and often entry-level) social workers to local offices diminished the impact of increased staff numbers.

Ministry for Children and Families' statistics do not accurately reflect the reality in many offices. They track social workers who leave their Ministry but do not show the movement of staff within the Ministry. This movement includes staff transfers, promotions, sick leave and work on special projects.

The staffing crisis was further heightened by the lack of social workers to fill in for current vacancies, and for vacation, sick leave, training or participation in special projects. Some offices lacked the funding to provide temporary workers, while others had the resources but were unable to find qualified social workers on a temporary basis.

Most regions of the province were affected by staff turnover to some degree. The Ministry for Children and Families stated they are reviewing strategies that focus on the Northern Region. In December 1999, there were 54 positions vacant in this region. While the Northern Region has critical needs and presents unique challenges, a province-wide recruitment and retention strategy must be developed to allow for the development of a stable and mature workforce. Until these issues are dealt with it is not possible to determine how many social work staff are required to provide essential services and further workload review activity will not improve the present situation.

With this staffing situation in mind, I recommend:
That the Ministry for Children and Families create a provincial strategy to retain social workers and dedicate the necessary resources to ensure success. Further, this strategy be publicly reported and annual progress reports provided.

Integrated Case Management

The Advocate has recommended:

That the Ministry for Children and Families define integrated case management and provide in its budget forecasts the resources to allow the development of this approach in all communities in British Columbia. (1998 Annual Report)

This recommendation has been partially implemented.

Integrated case management is well-defined in the training materials. There is no dedicated budget for developing this approach in all communities in British Columbia.

Training for Social Workers

The Advocate has recommended:

That the Ministry for Children and Families provide training for social workers in integrated case management and inclusive planning for children and youth in government care. (1998 Annual Report)

This recommendation has been implemented.

The development of integrated case management training is good news but the training and use of materials is voluntary and depends on the capacity of individual communities to arrange local training. The Ministry for Children and Families describes integrated case management as its new approach to working with children, youth and families. In establishing this new and different approach, the Ministry must take a more proactive role in ensuring that all communities have the opportunity to participate in the training.

Comprehensive Supervisor Training

The Advocate has recommended:

That the Ministry for Children and Families provide comprehensive training for all supervisors beginning in 1999. (1998 Annual Report)

This recommendation has not been implemented.

Supervisors not only play a key role in staff development and retention but also in clinical supervision. Audit reports clearly indicate that local offices staffed with focused well-trained

team supervisors and with the necessary temporary workers to cover social worker absences demonstrated the best practice regardless of the level of staff turnover.

The training needs of supervisors have not been given sufficient priority. The essential and ongoing leadership required by supervisors to mentor staff, to assist with professional development, and to ensure that good practice standards are implemented is key to ensuring high-quality services for children and youth and their families. I see this as one of the cornerstones in the development of a strong organization of well-trained and supported professional staff that will in turn deliver quality services.

The Ministry for Children and Families has approximately 300 local offices, each with a team supervisor. Only one third of clinical supervisors were trained in 1999. This number does not meet the demand, and training must be made available to all supervisors. In order for this to happen resources for travel and assistance with coverage of essential work in their home office must be provided to facilitate participation by team supervisors.

Public, Needs-Based Budget

The Advocate has recommended:

That the Ministry for Children and Families make public the estimated budget required to address the essential service needs of children and youth in care and those with special needs; to provide adequate alcohol and drug services; and to provide adequate mental health services. This would be a needs-based budget. (1998 Annual Report)

This recommendation has not been implemented.

Budget development in the Ministry for Children and Families follows traditional provincial government patterns. This ministry, like all others, is given a budget and its task is to determine how best to allocate these funds. Much of the budget is predetermined: staffing costs, basic services for children in care, and the cost of residential placements for children and adults with developmental delays. The current budget process focuses on reallocating resources, rather than meeting all essential needs. Without knowing the full extent of the essential needs of children and youth, it is not possible to advocate for appropriate resources.

All service areas are affected by this 'make-do' approach, including:

Children with Special Needs and their Families

The demand for services from children and families remains constant. Families are desperate for immediate services and are frustrated with another planning and consultation process. Many families are struggling with limited or no assistance to care for their special needs children at home (autism is one example of a special need requiring intensive treatment). Without some level of support, children in families unable to cope may end up in government care. This is not in anyone's best interest, nor is it fiscally responsible.

Mental Health Services for Children and Youth

These services have not been expanded. Families and service providers continue to tell the Advocate's Office of their inability to access timely and effective help. The Ministry's audit reports describe mental health problems as a growing concern among many families.

Alcohol and Drug Services

These services were expanded by $9.25 million providing additional resources to 16 communities. I am concerned that the funding for these services has come by redirecting funds from other essential service areas. To date, I have not been able to secure information on the funding source. As part of its cost-reduction strategy, the Ministry for Children and Families has stated it would have to reallocate resources. Essential alcohol and drug rehabilitation services must be funded but not at the expense of other equally essential services.

A needs-based budget has not been developed by the Ministry for Children and Families. There is no public information available about the resource base necessary for all children and youth to get what they need to optimize their growth and development—to realize their full potential. As we do not know what the target is, we have no ability to judge if progress is being made, and whether funds are being managed effectively.

Ministry Actions

In the June 1999 Budget Estimate Debates, the Minister for Children and Families stated:

> "We've done a thumbnail sketch. Just looking at the child care systems—mental health, probation and social workers, alcohol and drugs, the community living sector, enhanced money for prevention, and enhanced adult and youth addiction services—to meet and to do a needs assessment and to actually fund all

of these programs so that there are no waiting lists, and so that everybody who needed services received them, would cost close to $500 million for the Ministry. That is a lot of dollars and it's pretty difficult for us to say: 'Yes, we believe we should go on a needs-basis budget.'"

Multi-year Implementation Plan

The Advocate has recommended:

That government commit to a multi-year implementation plan to address these essential service needs. (1998 Annual Report)

This recommendation has not been implemented.

The government cannot commit to an implementation plan without knowing what resources are required. As discussed in the previous recommendation, the first step is the development of a needs-based budget that will provide realistic targets. This, in turn, will lead to the development of a three to five year implementation plan.

Exemption from Fiscal Restraint

The Advocate has recommended:

That the Ministry for Children and Families be exempt from any government-wide fiscal restraint program in relation to the provision of essential services for children and youth in government care. (1998 Annual Report)

This recommendation has not been implemented.

Government-wide fiscal restraint measures were introduced in February and March of 1999. The Ministry for Children and Families was not exempt. Basic food, clothing and shelter needs of children and youth in care were met. All other services were affected by these restraint measures, including family support services, staff recruitment and training, staff travel (which includes critical visits to children who are living in the care of government), and services for older youth.

Ministry Actions

In the June 1999 Budget Estimate Debates the Minister for Children and Families was asked about obtaining this exemption and she stated:

> "That is not something that the Ministry can determine. Treasury Board does those determinations and in fact we have been exempt from cuts. There are only three ministries in government that received additional funds and increases and they are Education, Health and Children and Families. Each of those ministries, including Education and Health, service children. So we have made commitments to service children and families in this province."

Clearly children and youth in care are affected by fiscal restraint programs. We have been told of children in care who are not able to obtain funds for elective classes in high school or to purchase graduation photos. Others require special programs to improve their school performance but such funding is not always available. Children and youth who have government as their parent deserve to receive parenting which is at least as good as we expect for our own children. They need all of us to be their advocates.

The Work of the Advocate's Office

The Office of the Child, Youth and Family Advocate works with children, youth and their families when they believe they are not getting the services they need from the provincial government or when children, youth and families do not know where to turn to get the help they need. The Advocate's Office also supports local advocacy work throughout British Columbia. This work forms the foundation for the development of advocacy and good service in the system that serves children and youth.[1] The following section is a snapshot of our local advocacy work in 1999 and a review of what happens when people contact the Advocate's Office with concerns about children and youth. The section, "Barriers to Good Service" (page 43) summarizes in detail the concerns raised by callers to the Advocate's Office.

Local advocacy development

It is essential that the communities of British Columbia continue to nurture and support the health and growth of our young people. Friends, family members, teachers, childcare workers, foster parents, social workers and others help children and youth receive the services they need. They go to meetings with young people, develop workshops for youth, volunteer in child and youth related groups and support local advocacy projects.

In 1999, the Advocate's staff visited over 25 communities throughout the province and met with local advocates, parents, children, youth and service providers to talk about advocacy and local issues facing children and youth. We also provided advocacy training in many communities for people working directly with children and youth.

Kamloops

One of the local projects that the Advocate supported in 1999 was the Kamloops Advocacy Project. Guided by the Kamloops Advocacy Council, with active representation from government service providers and community agencies, this project has trained approximately 400 service providers in Kamloops and other communities including Clearwater and Merritt.

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[1] The work of the Advocate is defined in the *Child, Youth and Family Advocacy Act*. Copies of the Act are available from our website at <www.advokids.org>.

The Kamloops Council has also engaged in a number of other activities including the development of a brochure and self-help advocacy booklet and working with various community groups to raise awareness about early childhood development. The Advocacy Project has also assisted in training and supporting teen parents to be effective advocates for themselves and their children.

Youth Advocacy

Working closely with the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks, the Youth Advocate continues to work with youth in care throughout the province.

In the spring of 1999, the first YouthSpeak event took place in Kamloops. The conference, organised and run by youth in care to discuss relevant youth issues, produced a report and manual to be shared with other communities. The Youth Advocate is also working with a Burnaby youth group in planning a YouthSpeak event in the Spring of 2000 and with the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks to plan an Upper Vancouver Island YouthSpeak event in June 2000.

In 2000, the Youth Advocate will assist in the development of advocacy workshops for youth and review the experiences of former youth in care when accessing their personal Ministry files. She will work on a project to develop playing cards with information and resources for youth in care, and work with the Advocate's Office in the ongoing development of our website to ensure that it includes information on advocacy and youth projects.

What happens when you contact us?

When people contact the Advocate's Office asking for help with a situation relating to a child or youth, they are referred to a member of our Client Services staff who try to return the call within one working day. Most people need information on advocacy, available services, the rights of children and youth, how the system works and how to make complaints. If a concern is outside the Advocate's mandate, callers are redirected to other sources.

For those who require further assistance the Advocate's staff provide advocacy mentoring and support. In some situations, we speak directly with social workers or other service providers to explain the caller's perspective.

We become more involved in direct advocacy on behalf of a child or youth when they are unable to be their own advocate and when a natural advocate[2] is not present. This service ranges from making a complaint on behalf of a child or youth, participating in an alternate dispute resolution process or assisting with a formal appeal such as the Children's Commission[3] Tribunal.

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[2] Natural advocates are friends, parents or others whom a child or youth can turn to for help in resolving a problem.

[3] For more information on the Children's Commission visit their website at <www.childservices.gov.bc.ca>.

Barriers to Good Service

It is critical that the Ministry for Children and Families, parent to 16,000 children and provider of essential services for children and youth, be able to respond to and resolve complaints. This section of my report presents a summary of concerns about services to children and youth raised by callers to the Advocate's Office in 1999. These calls to the Advocate's office inform the government about areas requiring attention and improvement, based on the perspective of those children and youth needing and receiving services.

In 1998 we developed a framework to describe the barriers to service that people face in a language and format that can be understood and implemented by relevant ministries and service agencies. The framework is based on principles of good service delivery—a service system must be accessible, responsive, inclusive, comprehensive and accountable. Planning must focus on the best interest, views and needs of the young person who is requiring service. (For further information on these principles please see Appendix on page 51.)

Who needs an Advocate?

In 1999, over 2,000 individuals contacted the Advocate's Office asking for help with situations relating to 2,710 children and youth. People seek information about how the system works, about the rights of children and youth, and they seek advice and support in resolving difficulties.

Half of the calls we received in 1999 were from family members. We also heard from foster parents, counsellors, social workers, child and youth care workers, friends and other advocates. Calls received directly from children and youth increased from 14 per cent in 1998 to 19 per cent in 1999. Most of these calls were from young people between the ages of 15 and 18.

Who is calling?	1999	1998	1997	1996
Children and youth	19%	14%	10%	4%
Families	51%	41%	32%	31%
Service providers	8%	10%	10%	12%
Unspecified adults	15%	32%	45%	47%
Others	7%	3%	3%	6%

In 1999 we received requests for service involving 2,710 children and youth from all regions of the province. (Callers from British Columbia can call toll-free: 1-800-476-3933.) Thirty-three per cent of the children were between the ages of six and eleven. Sixty-seven per cent of them were in government care. Of these, one third are in care on a continuous basis and will not be returning to their families. The Advocate's Office received calls that concerned 10 per cent of the total number of children and youth who were in government care in 1999.

Legal Status and Age

Age (in years)	0 to 5	6 to 11	12 to 14	15 to 18	19 to 24
With Family	8%	13%	4%	6%	n/a
In Care	15%	20%	11%	16%	n/a
On Own	-	-	0.5%	4%	n/a
Total	23%	33%	16%	26%	2%

For young people living on their own the most significant barrier in 1999 was a lack of access to essential services. For children and youth living with their family, a lack of access to support services and a lack of timeliness were the major barriers. For children and youth living in care, the most critical issue was planning. For younger children in care (six to fourteen years old), being included and heard in the decision-making process was an equally significant barrier.

Ministry for Children and Families

While the Advocate's Office hears about a wide range of difficulties for children and youth, the main focus of the Advocate's work is on services for children and youth provided by the Ministry for Children and Families. The majority (74 per cent) of requests for assistance to the Advocate's Office in 1999 related to services that fall within the Ministry's mandate. The following is a summary of the barriers to service identified in 1999 that related to services provided by the Ministry for Children and Families.

Principle		Barrier most frequently cited
1. Accessibility	27%	Needed basic information Inability to access service due to limited resources
2. Responsiveness and timeliness	25%	Lack of response Delayed or insufficient response
3. Inclusiveness	18%	Individual not treated respectfully Individual's views not sought
4. Focus on best interest and solution-based planning	30%	Individual not accepting of plan Plan not reflecting what individual wanted
5. Comprehensiveness	22%	Services offered not reflecting individual's wants/needs
6. Accountability	8%	Unethical practice

(See Appendix on page 51 for a list of all 28 barriers.)

Calls to the Advocate's Office about the Ministry for Children and Families most frequently cited a lack of access to services and concerns about service planning. For example, callers had difficulty obtaining information about programs, rights, complaint processes and ministry policy. Many people who contact the Advocate's Office are angry and feel that the ministry has not given them the information they need or treated them fairly. Many people do not know how the system works and need ministry staff to take the time to determine what they need. They also report being denied existing services—often due to a lack of resources. In situations where services are being provided, callers often state that the planning is not what the child or youth wants or needs, or they simply do not accept the plan made by the service provider.

To better understand the barriers to service that people face, it is important to determine what Ministry service or program area is involved. The table on page 46 identifies the four most often cited program areas of concern within the Ministry for Children and Families.

Ministry for Children and Families	1999	1998	1997
Children in government care	47%	47%	35%
Child protection	32%	35%	21%
Youth services	8%	8%	15%
Family support services*	9%	11%	9%

As a percentage of Ministry for Children and Families requests.
**Ministry for Children and Families services such as Mental Health Services and Substance Abuse programs have been included in the Family Support Area in the Advocate's Barrier Framework in 1999.*

These are critical programs that provide essential services to children, youth and their families. Children in care, youth services and family support services mirror the three areas that are of the most concern to the Advocate in *Not Good Enough*. They are Early Intervention and Development Services, Government as Parent, and Youth Services. The following section reviews barriers by these key areas.

Early Intervention and Development

Approximately 22 per cent of all requests that relate to the Ministry for Children and Families concerned existing early intervention and development programs. Existing early development and intervention services provided by the Ministry for Children and Families are tracked by the Advocate under the program areas: Family Support Services, Community Living Services and services that fall under Voluntary Care and Special Needs Care Agreements.

Family support services include; mental health services for children and youth, counselling, respite care, home support, services for people with substance abuse problems and parenting programs. Community Living Services include programs for young people with developmental disabilities. When trying to access Family Support and Community Living Services, the most significant barrier was accessibility due to a lack of resources. Callers also stated that they were simply denied Family Support Services and told that they were not eligible for Community Living Services.

Less intrusive voluntary care agreements allow children and youth to live in care for short periods of time and do not require a court order. Special needs agreements bring children and youth into care when their family is unable to meet their special needs within the family home. The main barrier associated with voluntary care agreements and special needs agreements was planning—callers did not accept the service plan or felt that it did not reflect what the child, youth or family wanted or needed. Other barriers included callers not being included in the service planning or not receiving comprehensive service.

When trying to access special needs agreements, callers also reported that the program criteria was too narrow, leaving many families who believed they required services ineligible. In 1999, families with children and youth in care under voluntary care agreements found that when the agreement ended there were limited options available for the care of their child.

The barrier that increased most significantly in Early Intervention and Development in 1999 was a lack of access to Family Support Services, Community Living Services and Special Needs Agreements due to limited resources.

Government as Parent

The Ministry for Children and Families was the guardian for over 16,000 children and youth in 1999. Of the total calls to the Advocate's Office that related to the Ministry for Children and Families, 47 per cent were about services for children and youth living in care.

Planning for children and youth in care remains the greatest concern. Callers report that the decisions made about their lives did not reflect their wants or needs and that they disagreed with workers and others about plans for their care. Young people aged six to fourteen reported that they were not listened to or included in important life decisions. Children and youth tell of being moved from homes with little or no advance notice, preparation or consultation. Many of the young people heard from did not feel they were treated with respect.

Youth Services

A lack of access to services was the most significant barrier youth faced when they contacted the Ministry for Children and Families. This includes services provided to former youth in care, youth agreements, foster care placements, and referrals to receive financial assistance from the BC Benefits program.

Approximately eight per cent of requests relating to Ministry for Children and Families in 1999 concerned youth services. Youth described inaccessible services and a system that is not responsive or timely. Some of these young people were trying to get into care and were told by service providers that they were not a priority. Others needed basic financial support from the BC Benefits program to live on their own. They were often referred back and forth between ministries—not receiving services from any of them. Older youth who are leaving care at the age of nineteen worry about being on their own without support. All of these young people are reaching out for help to achieve independence—help that most parents in British Columbia give their older children.

Child Protection

One third of the calls that related to the Ministry for Children and Families were about complaints of child abuse and neglect. The most significant barrier was that the Ministry's response to child abuse complaints was inadequate. The Advocate's Office also heard from people who believe that the Ministry overreacted to concerns about child abuse, although since 1998, the number of calls concerning overreaction by the Ministry have decreased. The Advocate's Office also heard from parents and others who were frustrated with the Ministry's process that removes a child from the home. They stated that they were not treated respectfully or fairly—often wanting to know why social workers had not checked with friends and others who knew them—before removing their children. Often they felt that social workers did not take the time to explain what was happening and to give them the information they needed.

Outside Mandate

Twenty-six per cent of the calls received by the Advocate fall outside the legislative mandate of the office. The Advocate's Office received calls that concerned the services of the Ministry of the Attorney General, the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health. We continue to document requests that fall outside the mandate and provide limited information when appropriate. When callers complain about unfair administrative practices, they are referred to the Ombudsman.

Ministry of the Attorney General

The programs and services tracked under the mandate of the Attorney General are those that pertain to the justice system. Twelve per cent of the total number of calls to the Advocate's Office in 1999, fell into this category; most related to custody and access disputes between separated or divorced parents. It is critical that children and youth have a voice in the court process when significant decisions and plans are being made about their future.

Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security

In 1999, seven per cent of requests for assistance from our office related to services provided by the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security. Most of these concerned a lack of access to financial assistance through the BC Benefits program by young people under nineteen years of age. The remaining requests were families unable to obtain child care subsidies and other financial support.

Ministry of Education

In 1999, two per cent of the concerns raised with our office related to educational services. Families reported barriers in accessing services for their children and youth with special needs, particularly classroom aids. In some instances children with severe behaviour problems were unable to attend school due to a lack of support services.

Appendix

Principles of Good Service Delivery

1. Accessible

Information about existing services needs to be available, clear and easy to understand.

- Individual needs basic information on available programs or services
- Required service does not exist in the community
- Required service exists but resources are limited
- Service exists but individual does not meet eligibility requirements
- Person is eligible for service but denied access

2. Responsive and Timely

Individuals need to receive the services they require when they are needed. Decision-making and service delivery need to occur in a timely manner.

- Under response (or no response) to a service request or need
- Over response to a service request or need
- Decision making or planning not timely (or delayed)
- Service provision not timely (or delayed)

3. Inclusive

Individuals need to be provided with opportunities and encouragement designed to facilitate their participation. In order to fully participate, individuals need to have access to all of the information pertaining to them, their circumstances or their role, including the reasons for service and the options available to them. The information needs to be helpful, clear and easy to understand. All parties need to have their views sought in decision-making.

- Information was not shared with the individual
- Individual's views were not sought and they were not included in the decision-making process

- Individual was not treated in a respectful manner
- Individual was not made aware of their right to have an advocate

4. Best-Interest and Solution-Focused Planning

Planning should be done in the best interest of the child or youth and be solution focused. Service plans need to reflect the person's views and needs and be tailored to fit their situation. Comprehensive service planning needs to reinforce and build upon the individual's existing strengths, and also identify and develop skills in the areas where improvement is required. Opportunities for success need to be provided and reinforced.

- Plan, goals and/or assessments not completed or documented
- Professional and/or appropriate (i.e. band, specialists, school counsellor) consultation not reflected in plans or assessments
- Individual consulted but their wants (and willingness) are not reflected in goals, plans or assessments
- Individuals needs (and functioning) not reflected in goals plans or assessments
- Individual does not accept information or decisions
- Individual does not understand information or decisions

5. Comprehensive Service Provision

Services need to be comprehensive. They should be provided by skilled and appropriate service providers. Implementation of services should be integrated, coordinated, and appropriate to the individual's needs.

- Decisions/recommendations made disregard the service provider's ability
- Service provision does not address wants (and willingness)
- Service provision does not address need (and functioning)
- Service provision lacks coordination and/or integration
- Advocacy regarding individual's access to services was not initiated
- Advocacy regarding remedies to service deficits not initiated

6. Accountable

Good service provision ensures that individuals have a clear understanding of what they can expect from the service provider. As well, their views on the quality and effectiveness of the service need to be sought and considered throughout the service delivery process. Review and complaint processes need to be accessible, fair and free of retribution.

- Review mechanisms/processes not known, not fair and/or inaccessible to the person (includes if there is no mechanism)
- Individual is fearful of experiencing retribution
- Case practice or behaviour results in malpractice or negligence (includes assault, deceit, fraudulent misrepresentation, defamation of character, breach of contract, violation of rights, etc.)